

The Ashes 971

Chapter 971

Aspen silently swore that she was going to escape his clutches one day.

The instructor, Lily Williams, replied calmly, "Yoga is a practice that helps you relax. It's about becoming one with nature and your own body and mind. What it values is harmony between humanity and nature-letting things flow naturally.

"Ms. Stevens, your mind is clearly unsettled today. I think it's best we end your session here."

Aspen thought for a moment, then nodded. "Alright. Thank you, Ms. Williams. I'll come back tomorrow."

Lily smiled, then suddenly pointed outside the studio and said, "That gentleman is waiting for you again with flowers, Ms. Stevens. It's pretty obvious-he really likes you."

Aspen turned her gaze toward the glass doors at the front of the studio. There stood Seth, holding a bouquet, dressed sharply and polished like a spoiled, wealthy heir straight out of a TV drama. His eyes glowed as he looked at her.

His expression was calm and elegant, with a refined sort of charm. If she were a young girl fresh out of college, she might have been completely swept off her feet.

Aspen thought scornfully, 'He's nothing but a wolf in sheep's clothing pretending to be some kind of gentleman! He might fool others, but not me. If he wants to stare, then go ahead and stare all he wants. He can look all day, but he'll never touch, let alone have me.'

Seth always seemed to show up wherever she went-especially during her yoga sessions.

At first, Aspen did not think much of it. She assumed it was just another case of a man who could not take no for an answer.

Over time, she began to notice something off. Whenever she wore yoga leggings and moved through different poses, seductive and elegant in her own right, Seth would stand outside the glass doors, watching as if completely hypnotized.

One day, she even caught a shocking sight-he was visibly aroused. From that moment on, any minor curiosity or tolerance Aspen had for Seth turned into full-blown disgust and revulsion.

Still, she did not kick him out or snap at him. She continued to let Seth show up and trail her around like he always did.

Part of it was because she could not afford to offend the Haywood family. But deep down, Aspen had a plan brewing.

Maybe just maybe-Seth could become a way to get the Haywoods involved and help her escape the trap she was in. That said, the idea was not fully developed yet.

After all, the Stevens family of Bridgefields was practically a sitting duck. One misstep and Andrew could wipe them out in the blink of an eye. So, she had to move carefully, playing the long game.

After changing, Aspen pulled her

sheer stockings up to the top of her smooth thighs, slipped on a pair of white flats, and tucked the high heels she had worn to the office earlier into a bag. For the final touch, she threw on her cream-colored trench coat.

Just like that, Aspen walked out of the yoga studio looking like the picture of an elegant, powerful woman in the city-stylish,

seductive, and undeniably magnet

Several other students, both men and women, could not help sneaking glances at her.

Whether she was arriving or leaving, Aspen had become the most eye-catching presence in the studio.

"Aspen, you look amazing!" Looking as charming as ever, Seth ran a hand over his perfectly gelled hair and handed her the flowers with a lovestruck smile.

Aspen did not take them. She shook her head and replied, "Mr. Haywood, thank you for the compliment, but you should know by now that I don't like getting flowers. Especially since we're both single-people are going to get the wrong idea."

Seth's tone was full of conviction. "Aspen, you do know how I feel about you, right?"

Chapter 972

Aspen could not help but laugh to herself. Men in Blumedale really were something else-being a player here took skill, and this one clearly had it down to an art.

Seth spouted romantic lines like a pro, sounding so sincere it was almost believable. Compared to him, Andrew might have been a brute with zero charm who only knew how to exploit her, draining every ounce of energy she had left.

Nonetheless, at least Andrew was not fake-what you saw was what you got. Meanwhile, this charming heir from the Haywood family was starting to feel downright repulsive.

"Mr. Haywood, I've told you more than once-there's no chance between us," Aspen said, her voice firm.

"You should know I'm not even free right now. Honestly, my body doesn't even belong to me. While I appreciate your feelings, you're just wasting your time." She let out a sigh as if she was tired of repeating herself.

Seth's face turned cold as he said with conviction, "Aspen, tell me-who's the bastard? The one controlling you, hurting you-what's his name?"

"Just give me a name. I swear, if I don't get you out of this hell, then I don't deserve to call myself a man."

Aspen gave a bitter smile and shook her head. "Honestly? You're not even close to being his match."

Seth's face turned red with frustration as he scoffed, "The Haywood family is one of the Five Apex Families in all of Blumedale. As far as I know, the one keeping you trapped is some lowlife from a backwater place like Jayrodale.

"If you're telling me that some nobody from a dump like that is beyond my reach, then that's the biggest joke I've ever heard!"

Aspen did not bother arguing. She had learned by now that when it came to Andrew, the less said, the better-any slip could bring him crashing down on her again like a storm.

"It's getting late, Mr. Haywood. Please head home. I need to rest," she said, hinting for him to leave.

Seth looked wounded, his voice soft, as he pleaded, "Aspen, don't you see how much it hurts me to see you pretend to be so strong? Sometimes I think-if I could just find the man behind all this, the one pulling your strings and crushing you... I'd make him regret ever being born."

Aspen replied flatly, "You'd better not even think like that. Otherwise, the one regretting everything might end up being you."

Seth still wanted to prove he was someone powerful, not taking the mystery man seriously at all. After

all, his target was to pursue Aspen,

whom he believed was his golden ticket to wealth.

To him, once the Haywood name entered the game, anyone would be forced to bow down like a lapdog.

Just then, a small group arrived in a rush, cutting off his moment of bravado. "Ms. Aspen Stevens?" a man called out, stepping forward. "We're with Gabo Bank."

The one leading the group was a middle-aged man with a bit of a belly, but his presence was anything but soft. He introduced himself with quiet authority, "I'm Tyler Jones, President of Gabo Bank."

Aspen's eyes widened in shock. Gabo Bank was not just any bank-it was the financial powerhouse of Gabo Creek, second only to the country's national banks. In fact, if you looked at local cash flow, Gabo Bank was number one in the entire region.

After all, it was founded in Gabo Creek, built into its very soil. And Tyler Jones?

His name carried weight-he was practically a legend, controlling the financial heart of the city.

"Mr. Jones, may I ask what brings you here?" Aspen asked quickly, not daring to be rude.

Off to the side, Seth looked stunned. He had not expected someone like Tyler to show up for Aspen as even the head of the Haywood family treated Tyler with respect.

"Ah, Mr. Jones! Great to see you again!" Seth said, trying to sound humble. "I'm Seth from the Haywood family. We met at a Blumedale networking event-I even toasted with you!"

He figured this was the perfect moment to show Aspen just how influential he was, riding on the Haywood name.

However, Tyler did not even glance at him. Instead, he frowned slightly and said sharply, "Young man, I've got urgent business here. Don't get in the way."

Not Interesting at all

Chapter 973

Tyler said plainly, "Seth? To be honest, I don't know you, and I definitely don't remember ever having a drink with you. So please, don't make up stories like that."

He was still polite about it, but the message was loud and clear.

Seth's face flushed with heat. Tyler had not yelled at him, but his tone made it obvious he wanted Seth gone.

He was not even acknowledged, let alone remembered, and the drink? A total lie. His attempt to show off had backfired hard, and the shame burned worse than any public embarrassment.

Nonetheless, Seth did not have the guts to argue back. All he could do was step aside awkwardly, watching as Tyler turned his full attention to Aspen.

Tyler said respectfully, "Ms. Stevens, your new company in Blumedale recently opened a corporate account with our bank, correct? A transaction just hit that account earlier today, and I felt this matter was serious enough that I needed to confirm it with you personally."

Aspen frowned, thinking it over. The new transfer must have been from Andrew, the devil himself. He probably sent more money to help her expand the business.

She nodded and smiled. "Yes, I was expecting a transfer. I knew one was coming in advance. But Mr. Jones, it's really not necessary for you to come all the way out here. Did something go wrong?"

Tyler's expression turned serious. "No, nothing's wrong. But I had to come because the amount transferred was simply too massive, and I couldn't sit still."

Aspen's eyes widened. "Too massive? I actually don't know the exact figure. Mr. Jones, could you tell me now?"

Andrew had only said he had transferred more funds, not mentioned a number. Aspen had not bothered asking before, but now that Tyler had brought it up, her curiosity kicked in.

Tyler took a deep breath and said heavily, "It was 40 billion. Not a penny short. A clean, precise 40 billion dollars. According to federal regulations, a transaction of this size has to meet strict criteria, and your transfer passed every single one."

"The money landed in your account without a single flag or violation, so I had to come in person. Ms. Stevens, your company is now one of our bank's top-tier clients."

Even bank presidents did not always get to sit behind a desk all day. When it came to VIP clients, the kind who moved billions like pocket change, they had to hustle.

And standing in front of Tyler now was exactly that kind of client.

Aspen stood frozen, completely stunned. Her mind went blank. Back when Andrew had wired her ten billion to launch her company in Blumedale, she was already floored.

But now? He had followed up with another 40 billion, bringing the total to 50 billion.

She wondered what Andrew was trying to do. Was he trying to shake up the region's entire financial structure or playing some high-stakes power game?

Aspen could not figure it out. All she knew was that her palms had started to sweat

uncontrollably-Andrew was far more terrifying than she had ever imagined.

If Aspen was shocked, Seth was downright shaken to the core. The mysterious

man backing Aspen had casually wired 40 billion dollars.

What kind of monster had that kind of money?

Even the Haywood family could not just toss around that kind of cash to set up a company in a completely new market.

In the next second, Seth's heart

began to race with wild excitement. He had to win Aspen over-no matter what. If he could get this woman, then everything had would belong to him, and there was no greater jackpot in the

world than this.

Seth was practically buzzing with joy.

Chapter 974

Meanwhile, at the Goth family back in Jayrodale.

Dominic had been restless since he returned from Quinton's roundtable event. He thought it was the perfect time for the Goth family to rise. If he could impress Quinton, billions of investments would come pouring into the family.

With that kind of funding, the Goths could skyrocket and finally stand shoulder to shoulder with the Weller family, the Rhodes family, and other regional powerhouses

Eventually, Dominic could not wait any longer and eagerly waited for Nyla to get home from work.

He greeted her with uncharacteristic warmth. "Nyla, come here, sweetheart. You're back a little early tonight, huh? It's been a while since we all sat down for dinner together. Tonight, I want to have a real heart-to-heart with you."

Nyla gave him a suspicious look but walked over and sat down beside him.

Normally, Dominic was completely consumed by family business. Even when he came home, he only spoke to Camilla and barely acknowledged Nyla. To him, she had always been invisible, someone who could come and go without anyone noticing.

With Dominic suddenly acting like a doting father, waiting for her return and preparing dinner, it made Nyla feel more than a little out of place.

Dominic had no idea what was going through her mind. He just kept piling food onto her plate, asking her questions, acting every bit the warm, loving father he rarely ever was.

Sitting nearby was his pregnant wife Camilla, the woman he married after Nyla's birth mother had passed. She could not help but roll her eyes at the sight.

She hated seeing Dominic treat Nyla with kindness. Deep down, she was afraid that Nyla would one day fight for the inheritance-or worse, for Dominic's affection-against the child growing in her belly.

Truthfully, what Camilla hated most was Nyla herself. In her mind, this home would be perfect if Nyla did not exist. It would be just her, Dominic, and their unborn child a picture-perfect family.

"Dad, please stop serving me. I can't finish all this," Nyla said quietly, overwhelmed by his sudden affection.

Dominic just smiled and set his utensils down. "Nyla, the truth is, there's something important I wanted to talk to you about tonight."

Nyla tensed. "Dad, please don't tell me you're trying to force me into another arranged marriage. I just graduated not long ago, and I really want to work hard for a few years before I even think about marriage."

Camilla snorted from the side. "Work hard, my ass. A woman's prime years are right after college. This is the best time to get married. Wait a few more years, and once your skin starts to sag and that youthful glow fades, who's gonna want you?" Content belongs to

Nyla stayed quiet. Of course, she knew Camilla would love nothing more than to

marry her off quickly-just to get her out of the Goth house.

That way, no one could threaten her or her unborn baby's standing in the family.

However, what hurt Nyla the most was the unfairness of it all.

She had never once considered fighting Camilla or her future sibling for inheritance. She had no interest in any of that.

Dominic smiled and said gently, "Nyla, don't worry. Tonight isn't about pushing you into marriage. I respect your choice. If you want to work hard for a few years, go for it."

Nyla was really confused. In the

past, her father had always sided with Camilla and pressured her to find a man as soon as possible. He

had already tried multiple times to rush her into dating and marriage, practically pushing her out the door.

There was even a time when she became so overwhelmed and desperate that

dark thoughts began to creep into her mind.

It was during that low point that she met Andrew.

She had just started her first real job after med school, barely finding her footing- when Andrew showed up. He was handsome, with that protective big-brother energy, and his medical skills were downright legendary.

Nyla had fallen for him immediately. More than once, she shamelessly flirted, constantly finding ways to bump- into him, eager for any excuse to make her existence known.

Chapter 975

It was not that Nyla was some reckless flirt-far from it. She was just under unbearable pressure from her family, and Andrew's sudden appearance had felt like a lifeline. In her heart, she fantasized that if she could marry someone like Andrew, her life would finally feel complete.

Nonetheless, it did not take long for reality to set in. Andrew was incredible-kind, brilliant, and respected-and she knew she was not in his league.

Gorgeous and confident women like Lauren and Francesca were all vying for his attention, so someone like her did not stand a chance. That thought broke her heart a little, but at the same time, she felt strangely lucky.

After all, even though Nyla did not have his love, Andrew and Francesca, not to mention Lauren, were all incredibly kind to her.

Especially Andrew. As the head of Moonlit Apothecary, he cared for her and supported her like a mentor. At Moonlit Apothecary, she could already see a promising future ahead of her.

"Dad, if there's something you want to say, just say it," Nyla said, sensing that Dominic was not buttering her up for no reason.

Dominic gave her a knowing smile. "Nyla, I need a favor. And you're the only one who can make it happen. If this works, the Goth family is going to take off—big time!"

However, Nyla did not feel excited. In fact, a quiet alarm rang in her chest, and she asked cautiously, "What kind of favor, Dad? I've only just started working, and I'm not exactly experienced. But if it's something I can help with, I'll give it my all. If it's beyond me, though, I hope you won't be disappointed."

For some reason, Dominic's smile sent a chill down her spine. So, she made her position clear before he could push too far.

Dominic shook his head, grinning wide. "Don't worry, Nyla. You can definitely do it. It's not even that hard. I remember you said you work at Moonlit Apothecary now, right? I need you to use your position there to obtain two specific formulas."

Nyla's heart skipped a beat—she instantly knew what he was talking about.

Her voice slipped out before she could stop it. "Dad... you're not talking about the Vitality Pill and the Titan Essence Pill, are you?"

Dominic's grin only grew wider, eyes sparkling. "Exactly! Those two miracle formulas. That's what I'm after. Nyla, with your access, I know you can find a way to get them, so don't try to tell me otherwise."

Nyla shook her head firmly. "No, Dad. You're wrong. Those formulas are Moonlit Apothecary's most

valuable assets. Only a handful of

people have access—Dr. Francesca, Dr. Cedric, and of course, Dr. Lloyd himself. The rest of us aren't even allowed near that vault."

Dominic's smile vanished. He let out a cold snort and said, "Don't lie to me. You always look away to the side when you're making something up. Since the truth's out, I'm assigning this to you, Nyla. I don't care how you do it—you just need to get those formulas. Got it?"

Nyla's voice cracked with panic. "Dad, that's stealing! You're asking me to rob the people who've treated me better than anyone! All of them have been nothing but good to me. They've treated me with respect and care-how could I possibly betray them like that?"

Dominic slammed the table, his voice booming. "Enough! You're being disloyal to your own family! What has Moonlit Apothecary really done for you, huh? Gave you a decent paycheck and flattered you a little-that's it? Remember, no one will ever care for you like me!"

Chapter 976

Camilla could not help but sneer. "Dominic, I told you long ago that Nyla isn't loyal to our family. She's always been the type to side with outsiders.

"You treat her well, and in the end, she'll never remember what you did for her. If you ask me, raising a stray dog would've been better than raising her."

Dominic's voice turned cold. "You're right. I must've been blind to raise such a disgrace. If I'd known she'd turn out like this, I should've let her die with her mother!"

The alcohol was clearly taking over. Dominic had downed a couple of drinks, and now his true colors were coming out. His face turned red, his eyes fierce, and a violent temper simmered just under the surface.

Nyla was terrified. Before long, her vision blurred as tears welled up. She was used to Camilla being mean to her and trying to push her out of the family, but she never expected her own father to be so cruel.

She never imagined Dominic to say something so venomous-something like wishing she had died with her late mother. Tears spilled down her cheeks as she quietly set her utensils down and stood from the table.

For years, she had known, deep down, that Dominic did not love her anymore. In fact, he had grown colder and more aggressive toward her just like Camilla.

She had been gaslit, shamed, and emotionally worn down by both of them. Still, she tried to numb herself, to pretend things were not that bad.

After all, Dominic was barely home as he was always traveling for business. Even when he returned, it was late at night, and he'd go straight to Camilla's room without saying a word to her.

Nyla was invisible, forgotten, which she had accepted. As long as she could hold onto the title of the Goth family's eldest daughter, it was enough.

But tonight, there was no escaping it. She had to face Dominic's abuse head-on.

"Stop right there! Where do you think you're going?" Dominic roared as he saw her rise.

Nyla flinched, her shoulders trembling. She wiped her tears and said quietly, "Dad, I'm going back to my room. I'm done eating."

Dominic slammed the table. "Sit down. I'm not finished talking. You're not leaving this table until you say yes. I'm telling you this is the moment the Goth family is about to rise. As my daughter, someone with Goth blood running through your veins, this is when you should be stepping up for your family!

"But you? You're selfish, short-sighted, and only thinking about yourself. Not once have you considered the needs of your family. Do you have any idea how disappointed I am in you right now?"

The barrage of guilt and verbal blows left Nyla pale and shaken. She sat back down slowly and pleaded, "Dad, I'll help however I can, truly. But why does it have to be this? You're asking me to steal something that doesn't belong to us—it's just not right."

Dominic's voice dropped into a bitter sneer. "What's so impossible about that? No, think the truth is, you're just a coward who doesn't want to do anything for her family. Don't forget—you're my daughter. And if you won't listen to your own father, that makes you downright disgraceful."

Silent tears streamed down Nyla's cheeks. Every time Dominic used their relationship to manipulate her, she did not feel love—she felt something colder than ice.

"And that Andrew guy—didn't he have a thing for you?" Dominic growled. "Sleep with him, seduce him, I don't care how—just get the damn formula."

His eyes burned with ruthless intent, and his voice was sharp with command.

Camilla clapped her hands like it was the best idea she had heard all night. "Now that's a plan! Nyla, you've really blossomed

lately you're looking stunning the days. That Dr. Lloyd you talk about? He's young, full of energy, and clearly still ruled by hormones. A little flirtation from you, and he'll fall like a brick!"

Nyla ignored Camilla completely. She turned to Dominic, staring at him with disbelief. "W-What did you just say? You want me to seduce Dr. Lloyd? I'm your daughter. Your own flesh and blood!"

Chapter 977

Nyla could not believe how Dominic could say something so vile, so cruel, and actually mean it.

Dominic let out a furious snort, his tone sharp as a blade. "Listen closely. The Goth family is currently on the verge of locking in a billion-dollar investment deal. Do you have any idea what that kind of money means?

"It would launch our family into the elite overnight-we'd finally be one of the top powers in all of Jayrodale. For that kind of future, a small sacrifice like this is nothing. Nyla, you're not a child anymore. It's time you started contributing to this family."

Camilla, her belly swollen from pregnancy, was practically trembling with

excitement. "Wait-what did you just say? A billion-dollar investment? Oh my god, do you know how massive that is?"

She turned to Nyla, her tone sharp and commanding. "Did you hear that? Dominic is doing this because he has no choice-it's all for the family. If you had even a sliver of conscience, you'd agree without hesitation.

"So what if you have to sleep with someone? It's not that big of a deal. Let me tell you-girls your age are already using their bodies to land their first big break in the world.

"Some are buying cars, and others are closing on homes-looking glamorous and living the high life. Who isn't envious of that? But you? You act like a clueless little fool, shocked by something that's become so normal.

"Hell, if Dr. Lloyd had shown interest in me, I would've jumped at the chance- even with this baby in my belly!"

Camilla did not even blink while saying it. In fact, she looked proud-like offering herself up would be some kind of noble act.

Nyla stared at them in disbelief. The two people she lived with every day were twisted beyond recognition.

She shook her head firmly, her voice unwavering. I don't care what either of you says: I'm not doing it. Dr. Lloyd has always treated me with kindness. I could never betray Kim like that. Besides, even if I wanted to seduce him, he would never go along with it-so stop wasting your time."

Dominic lost what little patience he had left and slapped her hard across the face.

"You listen to me, and you listen well-you will do it. Whether you agree or not is irrelevant. I've already made a deal with Quinton. I promised him I'd get that formula no matter what.

"If you screw this up and Quinton

pulls out, our entire family is

finished. The Goth family has

Jayrodale houses-weak, irrelevant

already been a joke among the.

and barely surviving. This is the best shot we've ever had, and if you ruin it for me, I swear I won't give a damn about blood ties anymore!"

Dominic's face was contorted with rage as he jabbed Nyla's forehead, roaring like a beast.

Meanwhile, Camilla, face flushed

with excitement, added fuel to the fire. "Dominic is right-this isn't just about landing that billion-dollar deal. In fact I think we should go even further. Those miracle formulas from Moonlit Apothecary? We should copy them for ourselves too."

Her words snapped Dominic out of his fury and straight into scheming.

He chuckled darkly and said, "You know what? Thank god for your reminder, honey-I hadn't thought of that. If Nyla gets us the formula, we can make a private copy. Then hand the original over to Quinton, just to hold up our end.

"Once he's back in Blumedale with the formulas and we've secured his investment, we can start producing the pills ourselves. At that point, the Goth family won't just be successful-we'll be unstoppable!"

The two of them sank deeper into their fantasy, grinning like villains in a bad movie. In their minds, they were already standing at the top, the rulers of Jayrodale, with the Rhodes family and the Weller family crushed beneath their feet.

Neither spared a second glance at Nyla, who had fallen to the floor, her hand over her stinging cheek, silently sobbing in pain.

Chapter 978

A new day had begun.

First thing in the morning, Andrew noticed several missed calls from Aspen. However, he did not respond to any of them. He already knew exactly why she was calling-she wanted to ask about the new 40 billion dollar transfer.

However, Andrew did not feel the need to explain. As far as he was concerned, as long as Aspen managed the funds properly, that was enough.

Francesca stepped out of the bathroom with flushed cheeks, looking irritated and disappointed. "Andrew, my period just started."

Andrew chuckled. "It is what it is. Does your stomach hurt? Want me to give you the classic 'get some rest' line?"

Francesca clenched her jaw. "Don't. Only emotionally clueless guys with zero tact say stuff like that."

Andrew nodded seriously. "I agree. That's why I was going to make you a proper warm tea instead."

Francesca waved it off. "No need. I may be on my period, but I'm not cramping or low on energy. Don't forget-I grew up in a traditional medicine family. My body's been well-regulated since I was a kid."

Andrew raised an eyebrow. "So if you're not in pain and your energy's fine, why do you look so moody?"

Francesca's cheeks turned redder as she snapped, "None of your damn business."

Andrew watched her stomping off, arms crossed and fuming, and tilted his head thoughtfully.

Then, he muttered to himself, "Ah... period's here, so no sex today. No wonder she's pissed."

Francesca heard that loud and clear, and like a triggered kitten, she pounced at him. "You jerk! Say it again, I dare you-say it again!"

The feisty, curvy little bombshell was furious and stormed at him, swinging her fists. However, Andrew just gave her two firm smacks on her plump butt, and she instantly quieted down.

After breakfast, the two headed to Moonlit Apothecary, just like they had the day before.

"Looks like I'll be heading out to Blumedale soon," Andrew said as they got into the car. "I need to

check in with the Rhodes family net

especially Lauren. And I want to take

a look at the company Aspen set up too."

Francesca nodded in agreement. "Yeah, you should go. Make sure Lauren's doing alright—you know she won't say anything even if she's struggling. I'll keep an eye on things here in Jayrodale while away."

Andrew replied, "You don't have to. I'm not bringing Dylan or Natasha with me this time. They'll stay here, so if you need anything, you can count on them."

Francesca's brow furrowed. "Just be careful around Kenny and the Golding family when you're in Blumedale. That's their turf, and it's a very different game than Jayrodale."

Andrew gave a soft grunt in response. What he did not mention was his real reason for going.

The truth was, he needed to gather rarer, more powerful medicinal herbs—ingredients needed to refine higher-tier elixirs and, most importantly, break the internal seal within his body.

Jayrodale had become too small for him, and he had already harvested nearly every top-grade herb in the area. However, Blumedale was a different story.

That city was packed with ancient families, thriving businesses, and all kinds of hidden power players, so the chances of finding rare medicinal ingredients there were far greater.

Once they arrived at Moonlit Apothecary, Andrew called Phantom Eye over. He said, "I'll be gone for a while—heading to Blumedale. I'm leaving Moonlit Apothecary in your hands while I'm away."

Phantom Eye's eyes widened. "Mr. Lloyd, you're going to Blumedale? That place is crawling with the Five Apex Families and the Three Titans; families like the Driscolls are

over

everywhere. If you go there, isn't that like tossing a lamb into a pack of wolves?"

Andrew gave him a look and replied flatly, "When have you ever seen a martial king mistaken for lamb?"

Phantom Eye blinked, then laughed. "Fair point. Honestly, with your strength, even the Five Apex Families would think twice before crossing you."

Chapter 979

"But the Three Titans-Driscolls, Phelans, and the most elusive of them all, the Drache family—you'd better be careful around them, Mr. Lloyd," Phantom Eye said seriously.

He added, "From what I've heard, those families each have someone far beyond the martial king level hidden in their ranks."

Andrew remained unfazed. "If they don't mess with me, I won't mess with them. So what if they're above martial king? The world is vast no one stays undefeated forever. There's always a higher peak beyond the last, and just because they're the Three Titans doesn't make them invincible."

Phantom Eye nodded, still concerned. "Maybe so, but the Three Titans have always held the reins there. So, Mr. Lloyd, it never hurts to stay cautious when you're not on home turf."

Andrew understood where Phantom Eye was coming from. Anyone who survived in Blumedale's ruthless martial world had to have a sharp eye and a wide view.

Even a semi-martial king could build a reputation and live comfortably, but only if they knew how to pick their battles.

People like Phantom Eye had learned when to act tough and when to lay low. They could spot who was safe to challenge, who to avoid, and who to fear.

So, it did not surprise Andrew that Phantom Eye sounded dead serious when he brought up the Three Titans.

The man wasn't being dramatic—he was being real.

Nonetheless, to Andrew, it made no difference. When things reached the point of no return, when swords were drawn and lines crossed, he would do what had to be done no hesitation, no backing down.

"Morning, Dr. Lloyd!" Nyla had just arrived, her voice cheerful as ever.

She still looked bubbly and bright, flashing her usual sunny smile. However, Andrew noticed it instantly—the faint outline of a handprint on her cheek, barely hidden under her makeup.

He did not let it show on his face. Instead, he smiled and replied, "Good morning."

Then, he walked with her into the back area of Moonlit Apothecary.

Francesca was in the middle of measuring herbs. When she glanced up and caught sight of Nyla, her expression instantly changed. "Nyla, what happened to your face?"

Nyla's eyes darted nervously, and she tried to play it off. "My face? It's fine. Nothing happened."

Francesca set down what she was doing and stood tall. "Nyla. Stop. You're lying again, aren't you? That's a slap mark—foundation or not, I can see it. Tell me the truth. Was it that snake of a stepmother, Camilla?"

Nyla immediately covered the side of her face and shook her head. "No, no—it wasn't Camilla. Dr. Aicker, please don't push me on this. I really don't want to talk about it."

Francesca's temper flared. "You were like this yesterday too—clearly upset, clearly being mistreated, and still you kept your mouth shut. And now you've been hit, and you still won't say anything?"

"Tell me, Nyla—what's the point of protecting people who treat you like garbage? Why keep shrinking yourself like this?"

Nyla bit her lower lip. Her eyes filled with tears again, but she stayed silent.

Francesca's voice softened, guilt creeping into her tone. "Nyla, please understand I'm not pressing you to hurt you just want to help. I'm worried sick about you. I can't watch you go on like this-it breaks my heart."

The words finally broke her, and Nyla burst into tears, head bowed low. "I know, Dr. Aicker... I know you

mean well. I'm not mad at you.

There

really do understand. It's just... are things I can't bring myself to say out loud."

Francesca clenched her fists and said firmly, then let me say it for you. If I can't stand up for you, then Andrew will. He has more authority in Jayrodale than anyone right now. If he wants to act, trust me no one will stop him."

Andrew's voice was calm and low. "Nyla, I'm like a big brother to you. So, if there are things you'd rather keep private, I won't pry.

"But I want you to know this—if anything ever gets too heavy, if you're in trouble or need help, just say the word. I'll be there. Always."

Chapter 980

Nyla lifted her tear-streaked face, eyes full of sorrow. She choked out, "Andy... my dad... he's forcing me... He wants your formulas. He's making me steal them and bring them back to him."

She broke down into sobs. "Andy, Dr. Aicker, you should fire me. I don't deserve to stay at Moonlit Apothecary anymore. I don't even have the face to show up here!"

The words poured out of her as the tears fell. She had finally revealed everything because her trust in Andrew and Francesca was unconditional.

Her loyalty to them ran deeper than blood, and when it came to Dominic, the man who was supposed to be her father, she felt nothing but heartbreak and betrayal.

She had come to see that the man who once called her his daughter had turned into someone cold, greedy, and unrecognizable. He wanted her to betray Andrew -to steal from someone who had only ever been kind to her.

Nyla realized she simply could not do it. She would rather tell the truth than live with that kind of guilt.

Francesca exploded with fury. "Dominic is out of his mind! That man's nothing but a monster! Even Hidden Dragons and Quinton wouldn't dare touch Andrew's miracle formulas-who the hell does Dominic think he is?"

Andrew's voice was calm. "Nyla, what if I gave you the formulas? Would you take them?"

Nyla gasped. "Andy, no! You absolutely mustn't do that! Even if you offered them to me, I'd never take them."

Andrew smiled. "Why not? If you gave them to your father, wouldn't he start treating you better? Wouldn't that solve everything?"

Nyla shook her head, tears pouring down again. "That's not how it works. You've been so good to me-I could never take advantage of you like that. And besides, my father's in the wrong. Going after your formulas is greedy, selfish... It's just wrong. The man he used to be is gone. I don't even recognize him anymore."

Francesca narrowed her eyes. "So that slap on your face he was the one who did it, wasn't he?"

Nyla nodded, her voice cracking. "Andy... Dr. Aicker, I think I should stop coming to Moonlit Apothecary. I don't belong here anymore."

Andrew sighed and gently patted her head. "Silly girl. Who said anything about firing you? You're still a vital part of Moonlit Apothecary-nothing's changed."

Nyla's voice trembled. "But my father wants to rob you. He's not a good man anymore."

Andrew said calmly, "Then that's on him. But you, Nyla-you're still the same kind-hearted girl I've always trusted."

She had every chance to betray him, to hand over formulas worth more than gold. Instead, she chose honesty and loyalty-something Andrew rarely saw in a world ruled by greed.

In an era consumed by ambition and materialism, even the great families in Blumedale were tempted by the Vitality Pill and the Titan Essence Pill.

And the Goth family? They were barely staying afloat in Jayrodale, always struggling to stay relevant. They wanted to claw their way up. Using underhanded tricks, Andrew could understand that desperation.

However, that did not mean he would tolerate it. The Goth family was playing a dangerous game—and if they insisted on walking toward destruction, he would not stand in their way.

That said, a new thought began to form in Andrew's mind. "Fran, I'm thinking of making Nyla the new head of the Goth family. What do you think?"

The words struck her like a bolt of lightning.

Nyla stared at him, completely stunned. Even Francesca froze in disbelief.

"Wait, Nyla? She's barely out of college. She's young,

inexperienced-and a woman on top of that. How could she possibly take over the Goth family?" Francesca let out a short laugh, thinking Andrew was joking.

Andrew just smirked. "Qualification

isn't the question-it's about who's

backing her: The Goth family is asking for a hard reset. Nyla's been mistreated and used by her own family. So why not clean house and let her take the throne?"

